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ABSTRACT

Selection of language arts instructional content can be guided by the concepts of integration (the entwining of language arts content with other subject matter) and meaningfulness. Among the considerations pertinent to the curricular concepts of integration and meaningfulness are the question of whether something is acceptable content and the need to distinguish between classroom efficiency and effectiveness. The integration of language arts content with that of other subject matter areas has the potential to enhance both efficiency and effectiveness. Specific story content for reading lessons may be chosen in the light of instructional goals for other subjects, such as science, social studies, or art. To be meaningful, assigned tasks should be understandable to students and should be perceived by them as worthwhile. By making meaningful curricular choices through an informed matching of student and task, teachers will be building student motivation to learn. (GT)

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THE CURRICULAR CONCEPTS OF INTEGRATION AND MEANINGFULNESS IN READING AND LANGUAGE ARTS INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

Language arts is a curricular area in which the teacher is able to make decisions concerning not only which language skills to include in the curriculum, but also the content of the instructional medium. What is known about the information-processing tasks behind selection of language arts activities that are appropriate and meaningful for children? The authors believe that language arts content selection decisions can be guided by, among other things, the concepts of integration (the entwining of language arts content with other subject matter) and meaningfulness. The authors clarify those concepts in this paper.

The Curricular Concepts of Integration and Meaningfulness in Reading and Language Arts Instruction[1]

William Schmidt, Laura Roehler, and Margret Buchmann[2]

The concept of *integration*, as we use it here, refers to a particular and well-defined entwining of reading and language arts skills with other content areas. Reading and language arts skills, while essential to effective learning in all subject areas, consume a considerable amount of the school day. The successful integration of these skills with other curricular content could result in more efficient use of school time.

Meaningfulness is the second concept behind our research. In reflecting on their own teaching practices, teachers suggested to us that meaningfulness of content might be closely linked to both the amount and quality of time that they are able to engage children in learning tasks.

Both concepts have a history in educational thought and research. For integration, consider Flexner's (1923/1916) celebrated essay, "A Modern School." The Lincoln School, founded in 1917 and functioning for 31 years, presents a paradigmatic case for an integrated curriculum actually implemented (see Cremin, 1964). Also Part III of the 1958 Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education was dedicated to the integration of curricular experiences (Henry, 1958). Currently,

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[1]A paper given at the International Reading Association Convention, Atlanta, 1979.

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subject matter integration is an issue that arouses interest and controversy in the United Kingdom as well as the United States (Bernstein, 1971, 1975; Hamilton, 1973). An emphasis on meaningful context through the notion of "purposeful reading" was suggested by Clifford (1978). John Dewey's (1971/1900; 1963/1916) classic and well-known works stress the importance of experience and the relevance of work in school that points beyond the school itself.

Our work has concentrated not on the evaluation of curricular options that are integrated or meaningful, as much of the previous work has, but on the use of these concepts by teachers in the choice of content and the allocation of time to various subject matters. We are interested in teacher decision making on the curriculum and classroom processes and how these decisions are related to the concepts of integration and meaningfulness.

The educational system in this country is faced with a problem of achievement versus time. On the one hand, achievement measures and research indicate that more time should be spent in reading and language arts (Adult Functional Competence, Note 1; Ashman, 1976; Flanagan, 1971; Sticht, 1975). Empirical data suggest that active time-on-task is a critical factor in successful learning -- that the more time pupils spend on a task, the more they will learn (Wiley & Harnischfeger, Note 2). On the other hand, teachers are beset with pressures limiting the amount of time they can spend on reading and the language arts. The number of concepts and skills to teach in science, math, and social studies has increased, and so has pressure to teach new subjects like sex education, career education, and consumer education.

Some teachers deal with these conflicting demands on their limited

instructional time by integrating reading and language arts with other subjects. Others use meaningfulness as a strategy for selecting content, emphasizing content which is most likely to motivate students and increase the amount of time-on-task. Still others combine both strategies. We believe that reading and language arts constitute an area in which integration and meaningfulness are useful curricular concepts; they are promising research topics too.

Content Defined

Before we proceed to a more thorough definition of integration, meaningfulness, and other related concepts, it is important to clarify what we mean by "content." The content of instruction is to be distinguished from teaching strategies or methods of instruction. Curricular content is the substance of instruction (what is taught), while instructional strategy refers to the way in which something is taught (the "how" of instruction).

It is also important to note that, although we consider time an important variable in curricular decisions, we do not equate time and content. Time is a measure of content emphasis, whereas content is a measure of what is covered in instruction. Given these distinctions, there remains another problem. What is considered to be acceptable content is relative to some perspective; content does not seem to be classifiable in an absolute sense, at least in terms of what is considered acceptable in a school setting. It would appear that some of the content of basal reading texts, for example, is neither good literature nor does it have any other "academic" content. There is, however, still some content inherent to such readers, although it might be judged trivial or unimportant according to certain standards.

The point we are making is that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to develop a classification scheme for the content of instruction without a consideration of what is to be regarded as acceptable instructional content. For the concept of content covered to be usable, some perspective must be adopted which allows the teacher to generate such judgments. We are asking what the educational boundaries are in order to determine whether or not something is acceptable content.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

Another distinction pertinent to the curricular concepts of integration and meaningfulness is the distinction between efficiency and effectiveness. Both concepts, construed as strategies for curricular and instructional choice and providing criteria for such choices, ultimately concern student learning or student outcomes.

Efficiency is taken here to imply one paramount goal: minimizing the amount of time spent on some definable task or activity while still achieving the inherent end of the task. While efficiency is related to the element of time in curricular decision making and instruction, effectiveness is related to behavioral change in students. Changes of interest here are those which can be interpreted as effects of certain treatments or, less technically, classroom experiences.

In the classroom, effectiveness is far more important than efficiency. That is to say, the over-riding concern in judging the success of any endeavor is not whether resources have been saved -- however scarce and costly these might be -- but whether the desired end has been achieved.

Subject Matter Integration

Integration can potentially enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

The distinctive feature of integration is the purposeful combination of different curricular subject matters into one whole. This special kind of combination is obtained by entwining reading and language arts content with the content of other subject matter. The content of the other subject matter is called the *medium* for the language arts content.

One important question concerning the use of integration for language arts instruction is: What is the value of such a strategy for content selection and organization? The answer is the potential for efficiency.

Consider the case where the reading content is the recognition of main characters, setting, and the notion of sequencing in a story. It is reasonable, assuming an appropriate difficulty level, that the choice of which specific story to use as the medium is incidental to the purposes of the reading lesson. If the choice of one option over another makes no (undesirable) difference, or only a negligible difference to the language arts content and the related goal of instruction, specific story content might be chosen in the light of some other instructional goal (e.g., learning the history of the American pioneers in the 1800s). In this fashion, the language arts activity with its inherent ends becomes entwined with another activity and its inherent end, and so on. The result is a multi-purpose endeavor with more than one intended outcome. The purpose is not only the attainment of language arts goals, but the learning of content included in the medium (e.g., history of the pioneers).

This integration implies that the nature of the stories included in the basal text or chosen by the teacher has potential content beyond reading analysis skills. If a teacher is concerned about having little time for social studies, for example, s/he might choose stories heavy in American history content.

Story choices need not come only from areas like social studies or science, but could come from art, period literature, various literary forms, and many other subjects. The point is that this choice is important and teachers should recognize that they have this option. Through careful use of this choice, teachers can provide children with content exposure beyond reading skills during reading class.

Intuitively, such a multi-purpose approach in instruction makes a lot of sense. Care must be taken, however, not to go beyond the boundaries of reasonable complexity. Care must also be taken to ensure that the combined activities do not have natural features that will cause them to interfere with each other. And there is the question of appropriate timing. For example, if beginning skills in reading are the language arts content, then the addition of new and complex content could well increase the difficulty of the combined task to the point of interfering with the learning of either part. Finally, integration loses its advantages unless meaningfulness is given due consideration.

Meaningfulness

The commonsense notion of meaningfulness refers to instances of *something* being "full of meaning" for *someone*. *Something* can be an entity or an event (e.g., a chapter in a book or the discussion of that chapter). Meaningfulness cannot be enforced, because it is a matter of personal perception in response to some entity or event. The response is a matter of judgment.

A certain task can be meaningful in at least two ways. First, it can be meaningful because it is understandable to the student. In addition, meaningfulness has a valuative aspect. If a student judges a task as meaningful, s/he considers it to be important or worthwhile.

The judgment may relate, primarily, to the intrinsic worth of a task. The task and the student's involvement in it represent something of immediate value; it is esteemed as inherently worthwhile or valued for its own sake. On the other hand, a student may deem a task as worthwhile because of its consequences. Rather than looking upon the task as an end in itself, valued for itself, the student looks upon the task as a means to an end.

The judgment about the meaningfulness of a task put by a teacher to a student rests with the student. For the planning of a task, however, the teacher is obligated to make preliminary judgments regarding meaningfulness. But teachers cannot guarantee the task-involvement of their students.

Meaningfulness as a guideline for the selection of content for language arts instruction, pertains mostly to the more encompassing goal of teaching effectiveness. The argument that supports this contention runs briefly as follows.

Assume, for example, some optimal conditions of familiarity have been satisfied. Such conditions are satisfied when a task has enough intelligibility to be tackled in an intelligent fashion. What constitutes adequate familiarity will vary with the kind of task and differences in individual students (such as age, developmental level, previous education, and habituation to inquiry).

Given this optimal condition of familiarity or some approximation of it, we argue that the student's perception of a task's worth is liable to arouse the student's desire to involve himself/herself in the task, to increase levels of perseverance once s/he is involved in the task, and to lengthen the time spent actively engaged in the task. Furthermore, if the relation between time-on-task and achievement outcomes holds, we

can expect effects in terms of achievement.

In a simplified manner, "meaningful" curricular options can be chosen or construed through an informed and artful matching of certain student characteristics with certain task characteristics, the latter being broadly determined by general characteristics of subject matter. Knowledge of student background with respect to family and schooling and an appreciation of the student's intellectual capacities and developmental age will help the teacher to choose or develop a task which, in point of familiarity, is neither intimidating nor boring, but presents an appropriate challenge with the promise of reward by achievement. Such a task is a pleasurable experience of intrinsic worth. Appreciation of a student's capacity for enjoyment and its particular expressions, and knowledge about the student's interests and aspirations will inform the teacher's choice or construction of a task that is meaningful to the student.

Moves on the teacher's part to awaken, increase, or sustain a student's desire for learning are motivational moves; they relate to the aspect of value in meaningfulness as extrinsic or intrinsic worth. The teacher's motivational moves may be implicit in his/her choice of curricular content (e.g., a story read to students or assigned to them to read). They may be of an explicit and more overt nature, such as in the choice of an instructional strategy geared to increase student motivation.

The use of meaningfulness as a criterion for selecting content of the medium with which to teach language arts skills is aimed at increasing the student's desire to learn. This is assumed to be affected by the substance of instruction through the teacher's choices of curricular content.

Summary

We suggest that integration is an especially relevant curricular concept for the areas of reading and language arts. Since reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction can all use the same medium, the content of that medium is, at least potentially, an important part of the curriculum. We also suggest that teachers do not always recognize the potential content exposure associated with the medium of reading and language arts instruction. Because of this, they often do not take advantage of its curricular potential. We recognize the potential influence of such content and suggest that meaningfulness might be one criterion to be used by teachers in their content-selection decisions.

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